

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: June 11, 2015

Agenda Item: Statewide Bison Environmental Impact Statement

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Informational

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 30 minutes

Background:

The purpose of this draft Environmental Impact Statement is to determine if bison restoration is appropriate and if so, what potential opportunities are feasible and consistent with Montana's laws, policies, rules, and regulations. It is FWP's desire to fulfill its statutory obligations to manage all wild ungulates in the state, while recognizing that bison management presents additional challenges compared to other species.

The objectives of the draft EIS are to:

- Evaluate which method(s) for a pilot bison restoration effort may be appropriate, if any.
- Evaluate potential landownership scenarios where a restoration effort may be feasible.
- Evaluate potential costs and benefits of a restoration program.

The following alternatives are evaluated within the draft EIS:

- Alternative # 1: No Action
- Alternative #2: Restoration of a Publicly Managed Bison Herd on the Private and/or Public Lands of Willing Landowner(s)
- Alternative #3: Restoration of a Publicly Managed Bison Herd on Tribal Lands
- Alternative #4: Restoration of a Publicly Managed Bison Herd on a Large Landscape Where there are Minimal Conflicts with Livestock

At least one "case study" has been included for each of alternatives #2-#4 to illustrate a real life scenario that fits the general criteria of the alternative. Within any of the alternatives to restore bison is an opportunity to carry out a five-year test project. Any test project or any restoration project would follow implementation criteria described within this EIS to include: 1) project site criteria; 2) bison source herd criteria; 3) herd management criteria; and 4) program implementation criteria. In particular, any test or restoration project would: 1) only use animals free of reportable diseases and free of cattle gene introgression; 2) involve a pre-restoration range assessment; 3) have a well thought out containment and management plan; 4) have secure full funding for at least a five-year test period; and 5) have local community involvement.

Potential impacts to the human and physical environment are evaluated for the alternatives; however, the evaluation is based on broad restoration scenarios. The final Record of Decision for this EIS will not identify a site within Montana where bison restoration will occur. Rather, the decision will identify potential opportunities and guidelines for restoration if it is determined to move forward with some effort. A site-specific Environmental Assessment will be needed in order to fully evaluate all factors and potential impacts of any effort to restore bison if a Record of Decision selects any of the restoration alternatives. Selection of the 'no action' alternative will not preclude efforts to restore bison at some later date.

Public Involvement Process & Results:

As of today, this document will be publicly released, thus starting a 90-day comment period. A number of public hearings will be held across the state later this summer to collect public comment.